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ABSTRACT

Labor force participation of nonmetropolitan women rose in the 1970's but not in a consistent pattern. Their labor force participation rose 4.5% between 1973 and 1978, when they comprised 41% of the total nonmetropolitan labor force. Although women accounted for 89% of nonmetropolitan employment growth in the 1960's and 58% in the 1970's, their mean earnings declined. A greater percentage than before of nonmetropolitan women entered professional, technical, managerial, clerical, craft, and service sector occupations while fewer entered operative occupations, a former source of great employment gain for the nonmetropolitan female population. Educational level correlated positively with occupational choice and both factors together had implications for job stability. The three main factors which influenced the decisions of rural women to enter the work force are: economic considerations (resulting from inflation); changing family structure and social attitudes (the largest net increase in nonmetropolitan female labor force participation rates occurred for ages 25-34, prime childbearing years); and more job opportunities (resulting from the decentralization of manufacturing to rural areas). (SB)

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THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE RURAL ECONOMY

by

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Throughout the past three decades, the role of women in the economy has been in a state of transition. Emerging from an economic role of a consumer, women now also constitute an important source of labor to the marketplace, generating goods and services. By 1978, nearly one half of the female population aged 16 and over were either employed or looking for work.

Inflation, changing attitudes about the appropriateness of working outside the home, and increasing job opportunities are a few of the multitude of factors which have influenced women's decisions to look for work outside the home. With conditions changing so rapidly, it is important to assess those factors which may given an indication of projected patterns of labor force activity.

In the latter half of the seventies, women continued as an important resource in the economic development of rural areas. Predicated upon significant expansion during the sixties in the number of women in the labor force and the number of women employed, nonmetro women attained even higher rates of labor force participation and annual employment growth in the seventies. From 1973 to 1978, the labor force participation rate of nonmetro women rose from 43.5 percent in 1973 to 48 percent in 1978.

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Table 1 -- Labor Force Participation of Nonmetro Women

Age groups (years)	Labor force participation rates			Percent of nonmetro female labor force	
	1973	1978	Change 1973 to 1978	1973	1978
16-19	45.6	52.4	6.8	10.7	11.0
20-24	57.5	65.8	8.3	14.6	15.2
25-34	50.7	60.6	9.9	20.0	24.1
35-44	55.5	62.3	6.8	18.4	19.0
45-54	54.1	56.7	2.6	19.5	16.5
55-64	40.0	39.5	-.5	13.0	10.9
65-over	9.6	8.9	-.7	3.9	3.3
Total					
Nonmetro	43.5	48.0	4.5	100.0	100.0
Metro	45.4	51.0	5.6	--	--

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Annual Averages, 1973 and 1978.

By comparison, the rate of metro area women rose 5.6 percentage points (to 51 percent) during this period. Coupled with declines in male labor force participation rates, women comprised 41 percent of the total nonmetro labor force in 1978, compared with 38 percent in 1973. Similarly, growth in employment of nonmetro women averaged 5 percent per annum, exceeding the rate for men. Such labor force and employment growth

in the last five years is especially noteworthy when one considers that during this period the nation experienced one of the most severe recessions of the past twenty years.

Although a great deal of press has been devoted to analyzing expansions in the female labor force, few seem to realize the extent of this trend. Projections of national female labor force growth, construced over the past 15 years by the Bureau of Labor Statistics have fallen far short of realized growth. The magnitude of underestimates ranged from 219,000 (0.8 percent) in 1965 to 3.2 million (9.3 percent) in 1975. 1/ Accurate predictions of labor force participation are made difficult by changes in the functional relationship of variables in models which traditionally have expained female labor force participation. Factors such as the age composition of the labor force, martial status, presence and number of children and income of the family, which formerly reflected one specific response to labor force activity, now produce a very different effect.

Three factors are essential to understanding the incentives which influence rural women's decisions to enter the paid workforce: (1) economic considerations; (2) changing family structure and sex-role attitudes and (3) increasing employment opportunities. An additional factor, integral to all others, is satisfaction derived from varied achievement and social interaction on the job. But, the impact of

this subjective factor is difficult to assess since satisfaction can be derived from volunteer efforts as well as from paid employment. It will be noted, however, that there are certain intrinsic returns to the independence and self worth associated with accruing a source of income.

ECONOMIC INCENTIVES

Income is an important determinant of labor force activity, espeically today in an era of double digit inflation of consumer prices. For many families, having a wife and mother at home full-time is a luxury which few can afford. While married women represent a diminishing proportion of the female population, they represent a growing percentage of the female labor force. In 1978, 76.3 percent of nonmetro women in the labor force were married with husband present, compared to only 65 percent in 1973. Clearly, income considerations are not the sole determinant of changes in the labor force activity of married women. The changing role of women in household decision making, smaller family size, and later age at which marriage occurs are all interrelated. However, in order to attain or maintain a targeted standard of living, husband and wife units often decide to increase their joint welfare by each contributing hours to the paid workforce, rather than having one multiple jobholder in the family. In this way, leisure time can be enjoyed by both. An added wrinkle appears, however, as the cost of leisure increases along with all other prices.

Table 2 -- Population and Labor Force Participation Rates of Women in Metro and Nonmetro Areas by Martial Status, 1973 and 1978

Item	Metro				Nonmetro			
	Population		Labor Force Participation Rates		Population		Labor Force Participation Rates	
	1973	1978	1973	1978	1973	1978	1973	1978
Single	10,332	12,392	60.7	65.4	3,659	4,625	53.0	59.4
Percent of Total	19.4	21.8			15.3	17.1		
16-24 years	7,410	8,680	58.6	63.9	2,800	3,456	52.7	59.9
25-54 years	1,931	2,785	80.8	81.0	503	751	70.0	74.3
55 and over	992	927	37.5	32.7	355	418	31.7	27.9
Married, Husband Present	31,748	31,576	41.9	47.8	15,590	16,811	43.4	48.0
Percent of Total	59.7	55.6			65.0	62.3		
16-24 years	4,014	3,298	52.3	59.1	2,069	1,979	49.5	57.2
25-54 years	20,705	20,449	46.0	54.7	9,544	10,357	50.3	56.8
55 and over	7,029	7,829	23.8	24.9	3,977	4,475	23.7	23.5
Other Martial Status	11,139	12,805	41.3	44.8	4,724	5,557	36.2	38.4
Percent of Total	20.9	22.6			19.7	20.6		
16-24 years	588	620	58.5	68.0	218	283	61.1	69.4
25-54 years	4,118	5,187	68.7	73.6	1,270	1,740	68.9	72.9
55 and over	6,433	6,997	22.2	21.4	3,232	3,534	21.7	19.0

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey Annual Averages, 1973 and 1978.

Economic need is the primary factor in determining labor force activity for an increasing number of single, divorced and separated women. With increasing rates of separation and divorce in nonmetro as well as in metro areas, women are drawn into the labor market, and once there are reluctant to relinquish the independence associated with a source of income. One of the largest increases in rates of labor force participation occurred for women aged 16-24 who were either widowed, separated or divorced. (table 2).

Higher levels of educational attainment and higher wages available in the economy also provide economic incentives for women's labor force participation as explained by the following quotation:

> With escalating prices, increasing wages and rising levels of education, entrance to the labor force becomes increasingly attractive. The price of remaining at home becomes the foregone wage and, as that wage rises, inducements develop to seek employment and find alternative means of caring for children and dividing household chores. For females who have invested in higher education, it becomes imperative to regain those costs over a lifetime in the form of a career. 2/

ATTITUDES AND FAMILY STRUCTURE

Changing attitudes about marriage and childrearing and the much publicized diminution of the nuclear family have caused many women to be reluctant to leave the paid workforce once in it. Prior to 1940, women's labor force participation was usually limited to single women or married women without children. 3/ By the 1950's, women aged 35 and over whose childbearing years had ended contribued to large increases in participation rates. From 1964 to 1974, the labor force participation rate of young mothers of pre-school age children increased from 24 to 37 percent. 4/

The presence of children under age six formerly connoted a negative effect on female labor force participation. However, with increasing rates of separation and divorce, mothers with children under six are entering the labor force in greater numbers. On a national level, the labor force participation rates for mothers with children under six in March 1977 reached 65.9 percent for divorced women, 46.6 for separated women and 39.3 percent for women married with spouse present. 5/ While these data were not broken down by metropolitan - nonmetropolitan residence, the increasing rates of labor force participation for nonmetro women in the prime childrearing years of 20 to 24 and 25 to 34 give an indication of greater acceptance of young mothers working outside the home. (table 1). Although some women aged 25 to 34 still drop out of the labor force, the largest net increase in the nonmetro female labor force participation rates occurred for women in this age group.

INDUSTRIALIZATION

While pressures on family budgets are pushing females out of the home into the labor force, job opportunities are concurrently drawing females into the labor force. Rural industrialization in the 1960's and 1970's, effected by the decentralization of manufacturing into rural areas, created an economic base upon which an infrastructure of ancillary or support jobs was developed.

Manufacturing industries were attracted to rural areas on the basis of such factors as lower tax rates, abundance of land to build modernized plants, and the availability of a pool of low-wage, nonunionized labor. 6/ And as Calvin Beale notes: "From 1962 to 1969, half of all U.S. nonmetro job growth was in manufacturing." 7/ Subsequently, support industries developed to service these manufacturing plants and their workers.

Growth of the rural economy provided opportunities for employment, particularly for women. From 1960 to 1970, 89 percent of employment growth was accounted for by women. However, much of this growth was concentrated in lower paying, operative, clerical and service sector jobs. 8/

Nonmetro employment continued to increase in the seventies, but its composition differed from that of the sixties. Women constituted only 58 percent of total nonmetro area employment growth from 1973 to 1978, but the actual rates of female average annual employment growth were higher from 1973 to 1978 than from 1960 to 1970. This apparent paradox can be explained by the fact that with expansion of the rural economy, employment rose swiftly for males as well as for females.

Employment growth of nonmetro women averaged about 5 percent per annum from 1973 to 1978 compared to only 3.9 percent per annum from 1960 to 1970. Growth in total nonmetro employment during the last five years also exceeded that of the sixties (3.1 versus 1.2 percent per annum). By comparison, the reverse was true for metro areas where both total and female average annual rates of

employment growth were higher in the sixties than in the seventies. Although the absolute level of employment in metro areas was double that of nonmetro areas, the employment growth rate was higher in nonmetro areas.

Table 3 -- Average Annual Rate of Growth of Employment

Item	1960 - 1970	1973 - 1978
Metro		
Total	2.5	2.2
Female	4.7	4.1
Nonmetro		
Total	1.2	3.1
Female	3.9	5.0

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Annual Averages, 1973 and 1978. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population, 1960 and 1970.

The types of jobs which women accept, their hours worked, earnings, career potential and incidence and duration of unemployment, are key components in evaluating economic gain to women within the economy

The proportion of employed women working full time in nonmetro areas remained constant at 70 percent from 1973 to 1978. However, the distribution of employment by occupation was altered during this period. In 1978, a higher percentage of women worked in professional and technical, managerial, clerical, crafts and service sector occupations (table 4). In contrast, there was a decline in the percentage of women in operative occupations, which in the sixties had provided a major source of employment gain. With respect to the distribution of nonmetro female employment growth from 1973 to 1978, 17 percent was in professional and technical, 36 percent in clerical and 24 percent in service occupations.

From 1969 to 1976, the mean earnings of all employed nonmetro women declined from $5,315 to $5,120. 9/ For that 70 percent of women who are employed on a full time basis, earnings rose, but only by $85 over the seven year period, reaching an average of $6,590. The mean earnings of all employed nonmetro men also declined from 1969 to 1976, however, the level of their mean earnings was double that of nonmetro females in 1976.

The mean earnings of nonmetro women varied by occupation. The mean earnings of clerical workers in 1976 was $5,540, compared to $5,390 for operatives and $3,411 for service workers.

Increases in the percentage of nonmetro women employed in professional and managerial positions would seem to be associated with positive gains in earnings. However, average earnings declined from 1969 to 1976 by $694 (to $7,489) in professional and technical occupations and by $1,419 (to $6,776) in managerial occupations. Part of this decline may be explained by below average wages paid to entry level positions.

Table 4. Change in Occupational Distribution of Employment of Nonmetro Women, 1973 to 1978

Occupation	1973		1978		Change 1973 to 1978	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total employed	9822	100	12,012	100	2190	
White collar	4991	50.8	6,413	53.4	1422	64.9
Professional, technical	1226	12.5	1,603	13.3	377	17.2
teacher or college	642	6.5	689	5.7	47	2.1
other	584	5.9	914	7.6	330	15.5
Managers	484	4.9	665	5.5	181	8.3
Sales	657	6.7	725	6.0	68	3.1
Clerical	2625	26.7	3,420	28.5	795	36.3
Blue Collar	2027	20.6	2,359	19.6	332	15.2
Craftsmen	146	1.5	250	2.1	104	4.7
Operatives	1717	17.5	1,816	15.1	99	4.5
Transportation	57	0.6	98	0.8	41	1.9
Nonfarm Labor	107	1.1	195	1.6	88	4.0
Private Houshold	506	5.2	439	3.7	-67	-3.1
Service	1897	19.3	2,425	20.2	528	24.1
Protectives	8	0.0	23	0.2	15	0.7
Other	1890	19.2	2.402	20.0	512	23.4
Farmworkers	402	4.1	375	3.1	-27	-1.2
Farms and Managers	80	0.8	96	0.8	16	0.7
Farm labor and foremen	321	3.3	279	2.3	-42	-1.9

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, (Unpublished data), Annual Averages 1973 and 1978.

But some of this decline may be due to sales workers being classified as managers. Data disaggregated by industry, show that almost 22 percent of nonmetro female employment growth from 1973 to 1978 occurred in wholesale and retail trade (a relatively low wage industry). However, occupational distributions indicate a decline in sales workers, thereby indicating that more women in the sales industry are being classified as managers or clerical workers. As women enter professional and managerial jobs in low paying industries they reduce average earnings for these "high status" occupations which were traditionally associated with advancement potential and higher earnings.

The concentration of women in clerical and service jobs may be an indicator of future lower earning potential. "Increases in skill and seniority are less likely to command increased earnings in the clerical and serivce jobs, where women predominate, than in craft and operative jobs, where men are in the majority." 10/ For nonmetro women, craft and operative occupations may similarly provide few opportunities for earning advancement, since industries in nonmetro areas are less likely to be unionized and pay lower wages relative to metro area industry.

The education level of nonmetro women seems to be highly correlated with occupational choice. In 1975, 64 percent of all employed women, married with husband present, had completed high school and an additional 27 percent had a college education. An examination of occupations of these nonmetro women shows that the highest concentratioons of women with elementary school educations are in operative (31 percent) and service

(30 percent) jobs (table 5). By contrast, 32 percent of women with high school educations were employed in clerical positions with only 17 percent in operative jobs and 22 percent in service jobs. Almost 46 percent of college educated women held positions as professional and technical workers (the majority were teachers), while an additional 31 percent had clerical jobs.

Combined factors of educational attainment and occupational selection have additional implications for job stability. In March 1975, a month characterized by the highest unemployment rates of the last recession, a disproportionately large share of the unemployed nonmetro women formerly worked as operatives (table 5). For married women with elementary school educations, 60 percent of the unemployed had been operatives. This percentage declined to 48 percent for women with high school educations and only 12 percent of those with college educations. As expected, the overall unemployment rates for married women declined as education level increased (12.5 percent for those with elementary school education, 11.8 percent for those with high school and only 5 percent for those women with college educations).

By 1978, unemployment rates had declined as economic conditions improved. The unemployment rate for all nonmetro women was 7.2 percent compared to 4.8 percent for men. Nevertheless, clerical, operative and service sector occupations each comprised 21 percent of the unemployed. At this time, the majority of these unemployed women were re-entrants to the labor force whose unemployment was expected to be temporary. In fact, of all women unemployed, less than 20 percent had been unemployed more than 15 weeks.

Table 5 Distribution of Employment and Unemployment by Occupation of Married Women with Spouse Present, Nonmetro Areas, March 1975.

Occupation	Elementary School Education		High School Education		College Education	
	Employment	Unemployment	Employment	Unemployment	Employment	Unemployment
Total	602,551	86,097	4,022,847	472,912	1,675,983	83,600
Teachers	0.8	-	0.8	0.6	28.9	9.6
Other professional and technical	0.3	-	3.9	.6	16.7	7.4
Managerial	5.3	-	5.3	1.4	5.2	3.7
Sales	5.2	1.6	8.4	4.4	4.6	5.8
Clerical	5.7	-	31.8	24.9	30.7	36.3
Crafts	2.1	-	1.9	3.3	0.5	1.7
Operatives	31.2	60.0	17.4	48.3	3.2	12.3
Transportation equipment	0.8	3.8	1.5	-	-	-
Nonfarm labor	1.8	-	1.5	2.6	0.4	1.9
Private household worker	9.6	3.2	2.9	0.3	0.8	-
Protectives	0.3	-	0.2	-	0.1	-
Other service	30.3	29.5	22.1	13.6	7.0	17.7
Farm/Farm manager	1.4	-	0.4	-	0.3	-
Farm labor/ Foreman	5.3	1.7	2.0	-	1.5	3.7

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Public Use Data Tape, March 1975.

CONCLUSIONS

The labor force activity of nonmetro women has been increasing over time, but there has been no consistent pattern to these changes. The age structure of labor force participation has altered with more women in the childbearing ages entering the labor force. The martial composition of the labor force has concurrently shifted with more divorced and separated women, many with preschool age children, seeking employment. Also the occupational structure of nonmetro women's employment has changed in the latter half of the seventies reflecting increasing percentages in professional and technical jobs and declining percentages in operative jobs.

Yet, even with these positive signs of change in the role of women in the economy, average earnings of nonmetro women declined from 1970 to 1977 in a period of rapidly declining purchasing power of the dollar. In the next few years, it will be interesting to observe changes in earnings by occupation and educational level to determine if nonmetro women's average earnings will rise, approaching the level of their male counterparts, as women move up the corporate ladder, gaining experience and seniority.

Employment for nonmetro women is not a passing fancy. Manpower training and development programs must now be adjusted to nourish the full potential of this valuable labor resource.

FOOTNOTES

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